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ABSTRACT

While there is general consensus on the importance of good academic advising to student success and support for the American College Testing Program's developmental concept of advising, there is less agreement on the most effective model for delivery. Research suggests that both faculty-oriented advising and professional counselor-oriented systems may have fallen short of their intended purposes. Concern for the quality of academic advising and recognition of the important role it can play in promoting student retention and success underpin current efforts to improve advising. Steps to improve academic advising include the following: (1) preparing, reviewing, and revising a written plan detailing the goals and functions of academic advising; (2) screening potential advisors and informing them that they must be willing to do more than help students schedule classes; (3) requiring that students meet on a regular basis with their advisors; (4) implementing advising programs in which counselors and teachers work together as a team; (5) rewarding the efforts of those involved in academic advising; (6) training advisors in basic counseling skills and techniques and providing simulation and role-playing activities; (7) using computers in academic advisement; and (8) assessing students and administrators to determine if the advising system is meeting its goals. (JMC)

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IMPROVING ACADEMIC ADVISING AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Gary Railsback and Anita Colby

> "Academic advising is a developmental process which assists students in the clarification of their life/career goals and in the development of educational plans for the realization of these goals. The advisor serves as a facilitator of communication, a coordinator of learning experiences through course and career planning and academic progress review, and an agent of referral to other campus agencies as necessary." (American College Testing Program, 1984)

While there is general consensus on the importance of good academic advising to student success and support for the ACT's developmental concept of advising, there is less agreement on the most effective model for delivery. Acknowledging that the availability of financial resources and constraints on their allocation affect choices concerning academic advising models, Creamer and Atwell (1984) addressed the relative merits and drawbacks of counselor-oriented and faculty-oriented advising systems.

Proponents of faculty-oriented advising argue that:

- the teaching and the advising processes are similar and interrelated,
- faculty can provide expertise on the career options in their fields,
- faculty advising promotes increased contact between students and teachers, an important element in student retention.

Those who support professional counselor-oriented systems suggest that:

- faculty lack the time and interest to be effective advisors,
- faculty may not be aware of current employment trends,
- counselors are in a better position to refer students to the appropriate institutional resources,
- counselors have greater experience in goal setting, career and life planning, and personal problem solving.

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Research suggests that in practice both types of models of advising may have fallen short of their intended purposes. A survey of 14 New Jersey community colleges (Houpt, 1985) reveals that, according to counselors:

- the most successfully fulfilled aspect of counseling was the provision of accurate information about institutional policies and procedures, while the least successful was the development of students' decision-making skills,
- greater administrative recognition of the importance of advising, expanded advisor training, and better advisee outreach were needed,
- one-third of the community colleges had no training for advisors, one-third provided some in-service training, and the remaining third had some sort of orientation,
- few collegesused formal evaluation processes,
- at four-fifths of the colleges there was no formal reward or recognition for advising.

Houpt points out that many of these findings paralleled national trends.

IMPROVING ACADEMIC ADVISING

Concern for the quality of academic advising and recognition of the important role it can play in promoting student retention and success underpin current efforts to improve advising. Houpt (1985), Kazazes (1982), Wilder (1981) and Friedlander (1983) recommend such means as selective recruitment of advisors, in-service training, evaluation, the use of computers, compensation and recognition for advisors, and mandatory advisement policies.

Formalized Plans. One of the major problems with academic advising is seen as the perception on the part of people responsible for program implementation that advising is primarily an informational function. Implementing a developmental model of advising requires a written plan detailing the goals and functions of academic advising be prepared, reviewed, and revised as needed, so that all members of the campus community are aware that a plan exists and are familiar with its objectives. The college's plan for advising should also implement processes to assist students in planning coherent academic programs and in integrating their educational pursuits with their life goals and career aspirations.

Advisors. Advisors must be willing to do more than help students schedule classes. Potential advisors should be screened to ensure that they are willing to talk to students about personal, career, and educational goals, and about academic progress and problems. At minimum, the advisor should (1) be a specialist in the student's discipline and be familiar with the field's academic requirements and career opportunities; (2) be knowledgeable about the college's regulations and its resources; (3) know when to make referrals; and (4) have a basic understanding of human behavior and communication.

Mandatory Advisement. Several colleges are attempting to improve contact with students by requiring that students meet on a regular basis with their advisors. Whenever possible students should have the opportunity to meet with their advisors before they register for their first class. As an alternative, advisors should hold meetings with groups of advisees during orientation or the first week of classes. Some colleges are requiring that new students attend an orientation class or workshop to help them understand important aspects of the college.

Team Approaches. A number of colleges have implemented advising programs in which counselors and teachers work together as a team, with one or the other team member doing most of the advising depending upon the college.

Recognition. Whether the delivery model utilizes teachers, counselors or a team approach, the efforts of those involved in academic advising must be rewarded. Possible rewards include financial compensation, such as bonuses, college-supported conference attendance, travel and allotment; consideration in promotion and tenure decisions; public recognition via mention in publications, appreciation events, and notices to parents.

Training. In-service training should cover basic counseling skills and techniques, and simulation and role-playing activities. Advisement manuals can also ensure consistency and knowledgeability. These manuals should cover college policies, rules, regulations; curricular and academic requirements; procedures for course withdrawal, substitution, credit-by-examination, etc.; financial aid information; veterans assistance information; college resources; community referral services; transfer options; and advisor responsibilities.

Computer Assisted Advising. A number of schools, including Miami-Dade Community College in Florida, Oakton Community College in Illinois, and Santa Fe Community College in New Mexico are using computers in academic advisement. Though the programs vary from school to school, most have the following features:

- all courses required for program completion are listed in a computerized database,
- prerequisites needed to enroll in courses are specified, in some cases prohibiting students from enrolling in classes for which they have not completed the required work,
- information on which requirements a student has completed is recorded in a student's data file,
- unique circumstances (such as course waivers, substitutions, advanced placement, military, and transfer credit) are also recorded,
- individual messages to students regarding their progress toward degree achievement or their failure to meet academic standards are generated automatically, access to information on student progress is afforded to students and counselors either on-line or as a printed report.

The benefits of computer-assisted advising include reduced time in evaluating student transcripts, improved accuracy in advisement, ease in obtaining information, reduction in costs, and more efficient use of advisor time.

Evaluation. Systematic and periodic evaluation of advising programs is essential to their effectiveness. The ability to assess whether an advising system is meeting its goals rests with students and administrators. Students should be surveyed on a regular basis to determine whether their advisors:

- are consistently available
- keep regular office hours
- get to know the students personnally
- make appropriate referrals
- have a positive, constructive attitude
- are on time for apppointments
- have the information the students' need
- discuss personal and academic goals
- keep the students up to date on their course of study

Effective advising systems meet the needs of the college's constituencies and further the goals of the institution. The improvement of academic advising can promote student satisfaction with the college experience and encourage them to remain in college long enough to fulfill their educational goals.

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